

Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages, by John Flood. Routledge, 2011. Pp. ix-xvi+193; 8 ill. ISBN: 9780415877961 (hbk); 9780203832646 (ebk).

In a worldview that regards the story of Genesis as factual truth, “Eve is the beginning of women’s history” (3), but Eve’s significance as the female prototype and her function as a lens that refracted broader cultural assumptions with material impact on the lives of real women are only acknowledged peripheries to Flood’s focus. In this volume, part of the Routledge Series in Medieval Religion and Culture, Flood assembles an inventory of “representative” and “influential” (65) textual portrayals of the biblical Eve in works spanning several languages and literary genres, and in so doing he outlines the evolution of a historical character, a typology, and a myth as well as the means through which Eve became a literary subject, a topic for rhetorical debate, and “part of the standard mental furniture” of the Western imagination (6), shorthand for a set of well-worn interpretive traditions and index to a whole ream of inferences about women’s nature, women’s behavior, and women’s designated inferiority.

Flood’s exploration begins with the familiar pillars of the early Church and then turns to a valuable second chapter on non-Christian traditions English-focused scholars rarely have reason to study. Here Flood illuminates a tradition of Latin biblical epic aimed at inflecting the “cruder Hebrew narrative” with Virgilian touches (30), and also examines, with great sensitivity, the other major religious and literary traditions concerned with Genesis, concentrating on Eve’s appearances in the Jewish *Genesis Rabbah* and the *Babylonian Talmud* and her (unnamed) role in the Islamic Quran, available to Christian scholars in Latin translation in the mid-twelfth century. Flood does a fine job of highlighting the tone and themes of his selections, orienting each toward his guiding question of how Eve came to look as she did in medieval English literature. Chapter 3, on the Anglo-Saxon Eve, begins as it must with Bede and spends due time on the Junius MS poem *Genesis*. Then in the next two chapters, the book ranges through the continental heavyweights of later medieval theology and defenders of Eve to arrive in chapter 6 at Middle English literature, where one finds Chaucer and Langland along with the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*, its English translations, and the great drama cycles. By the epilogue, which looks briefly at Eve’s deployment in the witch hunts of the fifteenth century, Flood has built a vivid and detailed picture of the character’s history, set forth the major veins of interpretation with all their contradictions and complaints, and traced lines of influence among circulating manuscripts that illustrate a lively exchange of

ideas among texts both philosophical and literary, sacred and secular. He sets forth synopses of historical context and intellectual movements with clarity and precision and summarizes critical commentary with an even hand. If a reader wishes to pursue any one of the given texts in its full depth and complexity, or investigate a critical tradition at further length, the extensive notes and bibliography—a full third of the book—point the way.

If Flood had declared in the introduction that his method would be largely descriptive, his approach comparative, his intentions simply to trace “changing representations of Eve” (3) across a range of texts, and his goal a series of close readings and brief analyses situated within a specific intellectual or literary tradition, this reader would find nothing lacking in the book. Flood’s stated “feminist perspective” (2), however, creates some persistent difficulties. Flood asserts that his book, eschewing “modern theory,” “takes the pragmatic view that it is both interesting and possible to determine whether a work was truly profeminist” (82), and yet his attempts to reduce such culturally laden and linguistically slippery terms as “feminist,” “patriarchal,” and “gender issues” to a matter of pragmatics seem responsible for the problems he finds with “‘medieval feminist’ terminology” (3). Further, the effort to evaluate each text by whether its attitudes “could be regarded as advocating the dignity of women” (3), which appears to depend on whether Flood finds an author sympathetic or unflattering to Eve, restricts the kinds of analysis he is able to make. Augustine’s remarks are “unfortunate” (26); Avitus is “lacking in deliberate profeminist credentials” (37); Bede initially “may appear to be well-disposed” but degenerates into talk of the “weaker vessel” (52–53). The only noted female writer besides Christine de Pizan disappoints as well: the fourth-century “Proba’s views on women were no more charitable than those of her male counterparts” (32). By the last chapter, the conclusions are largely comparative, as texts are judged as either an “improvement” or “mark[ing] little or no advance” on earlier treatments (116).

This standard of measure leads to interpretive difficulties of another kind, for, as Flood observes, “even comparatively positive interpretations of Eve are clearly products of patriarchal stereotypes” (59). Profeminist uses of Eve, in sum, consist of damning with faint praise, employment of the *e loco* (Eve was created within Paradise, Adam simply placed there) or *e materia* (Adam was made of dust or earth, Eve from the rib of Adam) tropes (90), or the argument that while Eve sinned out of ignorance, Adam trespassed in the full power of his greater knowledge. Only in chapter 5 does Flood acknowledge that defenses of Eve, such as those registered in the *querelle des femmes*, are as well-worn topoi as the standard antifeminist fare. The tangles of the rhetoric itself do not seem to

interest him, and the quite provocative questions that his readings pose—why so often representations of Eve are “not internally uniform” (45) or why there appear to be so many authors “whose view of Eve involves tension and perhaps even contradiction” (76)—lie outside of the profeminist vs. patriarchal consideration, and so are not pursued.

While the judicious application of modern theory might very well have navigated Flood past the interpretive impasse imposed by his evaluative framework, the value of his meticulous research, his deft command of an array of languages and traditions, and his ability to sift out highlights and dissect major twists in a text must not be overlooked. His book redeems Eve by bringing to light her full backstory, with all its inherent paradoxes and contradictions, and since his impressive handling of her representations over a broad historical period itself shows that there is much more to be said of Eve than that her history is “rich and varied” (6), it remains to medieval feminists to build on Flood’s work and examine how the particular attitudes toward Eve that he has excavated impact the lives of the historical women for whom Eve is the credited origin.

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